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Intelligence and Sometimes Folly

THE LAST HERO

Wild Bill Donovan.

By Anthony Cave Brown.

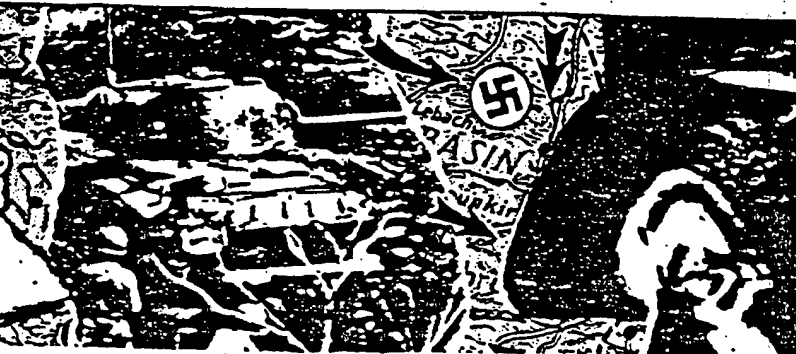
Illustrated. 891 pp. New York:
Times Books. \$24.95.

By EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN

HISTORIES of intelligence services tend to fall into three categories. The initial category is apocalyptic revelation—stories or books about the service when it is still shrouded in secrecy and at the height of its power; publication of such a work is often a journalistic event in which the machinations of a heretofore “invisible government” are partly exposed to public scrutiny. The next category is memoir mythology, a series of books of explanation, rationalization and confession in which former officers and agents describe their exploits or experiences. The final category is demystification: The service is shown to be just another government bureaucracy, and its legendary accomplishments and dreaded power are reduced to the actions of petty and squabbling men fighting to preserve their domains and careers.

The Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.), which was the World War II predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) and America's first real intelligence service, entered the first stage of its public recognition in 1945 when headlines in The Chicago Tribune warned of “Plans to Spy on World and Home Folks” and said, “Super Gestapo Agency Is Under Consideration.” These stories revealed an O.S.S. plan for a postwar intelligence agency. In the wake of the controversy stirred up by these stories, President Harry S. Truman decided to disband and scatter the O.S.S. (though it lived on unofficially as the “Central Intelligence Group” and was reborn, phoenix-like, two years later as the C.I.A.). The defunct O.S.S. then became the subject of more than three dozen volumes of memoirs that, along with other books drawn from these memoirs, forged a myth of daring and successful operations against the Nazis by oh-so-social knights errant and cunning.

Edward Jay Epstein, author of “The Rise And Fall Of Diamonds: The Shattering of a Brilliant Illusion” and other books, is writing a book about deception among nations.



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